

QUICK INFORMATION SERIES

**AMERICAN BAPTIST  
FOREIGN MISSION SOCIETY**

**ASSAM**

**1. The Country**



**A**SSAM is not a separate country; it is the northeast province of India, formerly called Eastern Bengal and Assam, between Tibet on the north, and Burma, another province of India, on the south. On the map it looks like a finger-post, pointing the way to the vast regions of central Asia. There are many interesting physical features about Assam. In shape it is a majestic amphitheater, whose sides rise on

the north towards the white crest of the Himalaya Mountains, and on the south into the ranges known as the "Hills" of Assam. Through the valley between flows the great Brahmaputra River.

The latitude of central Assam is the same as that of southern Florida, but the climate is more tropical. Owing to its position, the rainfall in portions of the province is the greatest in the world. Vegetation is luxuriant, and in the dense jungles fierce wild beasts abound. A few years ago the largest herd of wild elephants ever corralled was caught there.

Tea is the product which gives Assam its chief commercial importance. The tea gardens of the Brahmaputra Valley are among the finest in the world, and among the laborers in these gardens some of our most successful mission work has been done. Cotton, too, is raised in Assam,

and the changes of the New York cotton market are felt at once at our mission station in the Garo Hills.

## 2. The People

The races and tribes of the province are so numerous that 80 languages are represented there in a population of more than 6,000,000. The people known as Assamese make up about one fourth of this number, and live in the valley of the Brahmaputra. They are the mixed descendants of the Ahoms, who conquered the country centuries ago, and like the Anglo-Saxons are on one side related to the great Aryan race. About one half the population speak Bengali, the language of the province next west of Assam.

It is among the hill tribes that the primitive races of Assam are found. They are genuine savages, fierce and warlike. In appearance and in some of their customs our missionaries compare them to the American Indians. The Naga warrior decks himself like a brave, but instead of scalps he wears armlets of cowrie shells, to denote the number of heads he has taken. Among these rude but virile tribes the gospel has gained its greatest victories.

## 3. Religions

While there are many varieties of religion in Assam, it may fairly be said that, aside from Mohammedanism, there are two principal phases of unbelief with which the gospel must contend.

### Hinduism

The religion of the Assamese who live in the Brahmaputra Valley is Hinduism, the most commonly accepted religious system in all India, though its observance assumes many different forms in the various parts of the empire. The Assamese have modified it by many rites and customs of their own.

Hinduism means idolatry, often of the most repulsive kind, and it is just as debasing today as it was when Isaiah gave it such a terrible arraignment. It means the domination of priests and all the evils of the caste system. It means all kinds of immorality, practised under the sanction of a religious system; also indifference and contempt for any new religion which may be offered.

### **Spirit Worship**

Among the hill tribes of Assam there is no real idolatry, but a belief in many evil spirits who are supposed to seek the harm of human beings, and whose anger must in some way be turned aside. This is done by offering sacrifices of fruit or animals. The demon, however, is supposed to be satisfied with the useless portions, while the people eat the flesh.

The belief in these spirits creates a perfect tangle of superstitions, and the people are afraid of all sorts of omens. They have, however, a dim belief in a great Spirit who is favorable to men; and Whom they ignorantly worship, the gospel declares unto them.

### **4. Mission Work**

Assam is one of our oldest mission fields. Our first missionaries went there from Burma in 1836 in response to an invitation from a British government officer. They went to the extreme northeast of the province to preach the gospel to the hill tribes bordering on China.

This first mission was broken up by wars among the tribes, and so the work was established among the Assamese in the Brahmaputra Valley. With courage, patience, and faith these workers labored to meet the iceberg of Hinduism. There were some remarkable conversions, but for many years the Assam Mission progressed very slowly. About 40 years ago, however, the attention of the missionaries was turned again to the hill tribes, the Garos, the Nagas, the Mikirs, and others, and from that time Assam began to be a bright spot in our mission fields. It is encouraging to know that some of the few native Assamese converts were among the first to carry the gospel to the savage people of the hills.

The work among the tea garden coolies, who are immigrants from central India, was begun in 1872, and has been very successful.

### **Special Features**

Some of the converts from Hinduism have exhibited a wonderful transformation of character, showing that this citadel of idolatry may be, and must be, cast down. Some of the greatest changes that Christianity has ever produced are shown among the hill tribes. The photographs that our



missionaries send home of the primitive savages and of the same people after they have accepted Christianity are startling in their contrasts.

"He was a man of meekness and gentleness; of such loyalty to Christ, of such clear vision in religious matters, such practical wisdom, and such strength of character, that for many years he has not only splendidly led his church, but has been constantly sought as a counselor," is what a missionary wrote about one of the native pastors.

Another striking contrast is seen between the naked children that run through the filth of the native villages and the same children gathered in our mission schools. What a joy to have some part in making those faces so happy and bright!

Self-support by the native churches is making progress in Assam. Among the Christians of one tribe one handful of the rice measured for each meal is set aside for the Lord's work. One church paid its own pastor, janitor, part of the school teacher's salary, and built a new house of worship, worth \$200; they also gave \$35 for the support of an associational missionary. Relatively these are very large sums. In addition to this kind of support, the churches are learning to conduct their own associations with order and dignity.

### **Opportunity**

Wonderful openings have offered among new tribes on the Tibetan and Burman borders and the missionaries are zealous to press in. Moreover, school and medical work, hitherto most successful, need to be greatly extended. God has bestowed large blessings on this mission, which should be considered as his call to us to go forward.

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